

Cultural Perceptions of Aging: The Perspective of Somali Canadians in Ottawa

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Abstract Somalis currently constitute the largest Sub-Saharan community in Canada and as such have greatly contributed to the transformation of the immigrant population of this country. Although there is a growing body of research on the Somali community in Canada, the question of how the first generation of Somali Canadians experiences aging and transmits its values and attitudes in this regard to younger generations has yet to be explored. The goal of the present study is precisely to understand how male and female Somali seniors living in Canada perceive and experience aging from a cross-cultural perspective. A total of 17 Somali elders (9 women and 8 men) took part in two focus group discussions. Results of the interpretative content analysis revealed that, regardless of the cultural context, both Somali men and women foster quite a positive view of the notion of aging. However, as Somali migrants, men were more critical than women in regards to the challenges of aging in Canada. Results are discussed in light of previous studies on aging, ageism and culture.

Keywords Somali community · Immigration · Aging · Ageism · Stereotypes · Focus groups

Introduction

The Changing Demographics In Canada

The Canadian population is not only greying but is also being profoundly transformed by immigration. For example, in 2001, 28.6 % of seniors aged between 65 and 74 years old and 28 % of those aged between 75 and 84 years old were immigrants. In other words, more than a quarter of seniors were either not born in Canada or did not have Canadian citizenship at birth (Turcotte and Schellenberg 2007). Taking into account that age and aging (as a process) are socially and culturally defined (Ennuyer 2002; Guillemard 1986), such demographic shifts make research on aging essential in the Canadian multicultural context.

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Over the last two decades, Somalis have had a significant cultural presence in Canada and have directly contributed to the transformation of the immigrant population. Most early immigrants to Canada came from Europe and were White and Christian, which is in stark contrast to Somalis who are black and mostly Muslim. Not only does this significant difference mean that, as a minority community, Somalis are doubly marked, it also implies that they may potentially experience a difficult process of settlement, assimilation and integration as well as many obstacles in their host society (Adan 1992). Somalis constitute the largest Sub-Saharan community in Canada (Bjork and Kusow 2007; Statistics Canada 2006) and there is a growing body of research seeking to better understand their experiences and needs. For example, Danso's study (2001) identifies barriers (such as systems of institutional and everyday racism) that Somalis are facing over the process of initial settlement in the city of Toronto; Spitzer's study (1998) focuses on the ways that gender can impact Somali women's experience of aging within the Canadian context. Along the same lines, Crosby (2006), Affi (1997, 2004) and Hopkins (2010) are among the researchers having produced a considerable amount of work on the difficult situation faced by Somali wives and single mothers as asylum refugees in Canada, having lost their husbands to the civil war. Finally, Naji's (2012) work focuses on Somali youth, more precisely on the challenges they are experiencing in terms of identity construction and integration into mainstream Canadian society.

Notwithstanding the growing body of studies on the Somali community in Canada, the experience of aging and of being old from the perspective of male and female Somali seniors has not been fully explored. Furthermore, understanding how the first generation of Somali migrants in Canada transitions towards old age is particularly important and relevant: this group of Somalis is indeed the first to age within Canadian borders and will transmit its—most likely hybrid—vision of aging to the younger generation. As such, the current study will contribute to the advancement of knowledge as it aims to explore how, from a threefold perspective (individual, familial and cultural), elderly Somalis of both genders, perceive and experience their own aging process.

In the following pages, we first provide a socio-demographic profile of the Somali Canadian community as well as the context of its migration to Canada. We then turn to studies that have addressed the experience and the perception of aging in Africa (particularly in Somalia) as well as in North America, studies on which our research questions are based.

The Somali Community In Canada

'Somali' refers to both the citizenship of the people of Somalia as well as a specific ethnicity (Pérouse De Montclos 2006). Somalis are Cushitic nomads spread over four countries: they form the dominant ethnic group within Somalia (between 6 and 7 million people); they also represent two thirds of the Djibouti population (500,000 people) and constitute important minorities in Ethiopia (more than a million individuals in the Haud and Ogaden regions) and in Kenya (300,000 people in the North East region; Pigué 1998). In other words, Somali ethnicity goes beyond the borders of Somalia.

According to Statistics Canada (2006), the large majority of the individuals in Canada who self-identify as Somali (whether as individuals from Somalia or belonging to the Somali ethnic group) were born outside of the country. Furthermore, the majority of Somalis live in the provinces of Alberta and Ontario, specifically in the cities of Toronto and Ottawa as shown in Table 1 (Statistics Canada 2006; see also Berns-MacGown 2007).

Table 1 The Somali community in Canada, 2006

	Canada	Ontario	Toronto	Ottawa
Born in Somalia	20,160	16,020	10,230	4,005
Somali ethnic group	21,685	17,325	10,615	4,665

Statistics Canada 2006

The Somali Community In Ottawa

According to the Social Planning Council of Ottawa—SPCO—(2008), the Somali community is the largest African community in Ottawa and is mostly concentrated in the areas of Alta Vista (21 %), Gloucester-Southgate (14.4 %), and Bay (13.8 %). In Ottawa, the majority of the Somali-born population is young. In fact, 63.5 % of the community is between the ages of 15 and 34 and a mere 10 % is over the age of 55.

The SPCO also notes that the Somali community in Ottawa is facing important difficulties, some of which are related to the migration experience and others of a financial nature. The traditional Somali family is indeed experiencing many challenges: the migration experience per se and husbands' search for employment, for example, can sometimes result in both the separation of some families and the loss of the traditional extended family support structure (Mohamed 1999). Also, the challenge of traditional gender roles can result in strained relationships within the family and the community: by experiencing unemployment, some men are undergoing a reduced participation in the economic sphere and a subsequent loss in status (SPCO 2008). The Somali community in Ottawa remains the poorest visible minority with an annual median income of only \$20,311 which is well below the total median income of \$24,835 for visible minorities (Statistics Canada 2006). It is worth noting that Somali seniors are also directly affected by financial difficulties as pensions can no longer be guaranteed after the Somali government's collapse. To try to respond to such difficulties, the Somali community has set up various businesses and established schools as well as youth organizations.

Conditions Of Immigration From Somalia To Canada

Following the fall of President Siyaad Barré's regime, many Somali began leaving their country, which was then torn by civil war. They fled the armed militia that took advantage of the State's absence in order to terrorize the starving population, hence the appearance of a Diaspora in Nordic countries (such as Norway, Denmark and Sweden), in the Netherlands and in Great Britain as well as in North America (particularly Canada). This sudden departure from one's country, one's family, one's friends and one's everyday life is naturally synonymous with separation; such a radical break from the country of origin is associated with an «acute discomfort» among members of the Somali community and leads to «a failure to leave fully the present or the space of the present» (Ahmed 1999: p.343).

Furthermore, as we have stated above, the minority status of this community is based both on its members' ethnicity (black African) and religion (Islam). Consequently, the situation of the Somali community remains difficult, despite having spent two decades in Canada: their feeling of belonging and rootedness remains low, their economic integration is marginal and their future prospects are uncertain (Sharrif 2008). After having been forced to exile and having experienced life in refugee

camps, many Somali still have to go through a problematic adaptation process in the host country (McCoy 2000); moreover, this situation is reminiscent of the experiences of Europe-based, first- and second-generation Somali migrants who face prejudice and social stigma, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Bigelow 2008). It is also inevitable that, as is the case with all migrant populations, the Somali experience their new life in their host countries partly through the lens of their culture of origin; this can only affect their apprehension of both their vision of the world and specific social experiences like aging/old age and, consequently, the status and the role of elderly individuals. In the following section, we offer a general description of the meaning of aging and old age in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Somalia.

The Social Construction Of Aging And Old Age

Aging and old age are historically and culturally determined (Foucart 2003). Old age can be a privilege in a given space and time whereas it can lead to social exclusion in another. Similarly, according to a specific cultural context, aging can be understood and experienced either as a regression or as a progression.

In countries of the Northern hemisphere, independence and autonomy are highly valued (Bourbonnais and Ducharme 2010). Individuals are expected to succeed on their own rather than through the support of others. Countries of the Southern hemisphere on the other hand place more importance on interdependence and norms of reciprocity. Family and friends, as well as the larger community, are expected to provide support to an individual. Although such individualist / collectivist dimensions of culture lie on a continuum, with each society exhibiting different levels of each (Hofstede 2001; Hall 1990), it is plausible to think that these dimensions might have an impact (at least to a certain extent) on perceptions of aging as well as on the place and role reserved for the old.

Perception Of Aging And Old Age In Sub-Saharan Africa

Traditional Sub-Saharan societies are rather gerontocratic and seniors can maintain their authority through the practice of initiation rites, esoterism and oral transmission of knowledge and traditions. Furthermore, the tendency for the older generation to live with their children still remains strong (Attias-Donfut and Gallou 2006; Makoni and Stroeken 2002). Thomas (1983) also notes how the language and the expressions used to describe elderly people in Sub-Saharan Africa is revealing in regards to the way aging and old age is generally perceived: “*the grown up*”; “*the one in the know*”; “*the old one*” (obviously not used in a demeaning way). The author also notes that within the twenty-two ethnic groups that were studied in Sub-Saharan Africa, old people enjoy considerable prestige:

Experience; availability; eloquence; knowledge; wisdom: these characteristics justify the idyllic image of the old person that black Africans adhere to... This can be explained by the fact that an authentically oral society needs its elderly people, symbols of its continuity as collective memory and condition of its reproduction.

It is important to note, as Thomas (1983) and Diop (1989) do, that although seniors in Sub-Saharan Africa are still considered as important pillars of the community, their experience, knowledge and wisdom are more and more challenged by younger generations. Such threats to traditional social ties can be partly explained by the impact of modernization, globalization and formal education (Cohen and Menken 2006).

Perception Of Aging And Old Age In Somalia

Communication and traditions constitute the main vectors of cultural transmission in Somali society, in which information, history and folklore have always been passed on to younger generations through orality (as opposed to the written word). As a matter of fact, Somali became a written language as late as 1972, and the members of the first Somali generation in Canada frequently express their pride and attachment to their language, described as rich and poetic as well as a great source of personal pride (Lewis 1999). The Somali also maintain a strong connection to their homeland and their cultural heritage. However, first-generation Somalis regularly express worries regarding the transmission of their culture to the younger generations, partly because of the latter's very low exposure to the language (Library and Archives Canada reports 2006).

Traditional family values, encompassing a kinship system, occupy a central place in Somali culture. The notion of social support revolves mainly around norms of reciprocity where the community is expected to play a major role. As Stewart *et al.* (2008) note in their qualitative study on the meanings of social support among Chinese and Somali immigrants and refugees in Canada: "The Somalis embraced a more holistic concept of social support that included financial, psychological, and moral support. Most Somalis described helpful support in their homeland linked to individuals such as family members and friends." (p.135).

Traditional Somali families are patriarchal and are based on patrilineal descent; this means that Somali are able to trace their lineage up to 5 or 6 generations. Somali individuals inherit their father's name, as well as their grand-father's and their great grand-father's. Although Somali society is mainly patriarchal, Lewis (1994) underlines the importance of matrilineal ties resulting from marriage. Precisely, when a Somali woman gets married, she inherits her husband's family ties but also keeps her own; her brother, for example, is an extremely important figure in the lives of her children. In Somalia, men and women fulfill gender-specified tasks (Lewis 1994). Most men do not deal with housework as the latter is usually delegated to women. However, if an elderly male individual leaves his home without his partner, he must adapt and learn to deal with house chores. Most elderly men are involved in specific tasks within the community, such as the maintenance of the function of the kinship system. As far as women are concerned, they have mostly been reliant on men (Crosby 2006); such a subordinate position can be partly explained by the fact that, as men used to enjoy a better education than their female counterparts as well as occupy the most senior positions in colonial / post-colonial administrations, they (men) have always been the most socially and economically privileged members of Somali society. During the pre post Colonial period (1839–1960), girls from rural communities stayed home to deal with chores; in contrast, in order to increase their chances of finding a job and subsequently supporting their family, boys were sent to school. Nowadays, the role of Somali women is slowly changing. One of the first influences was the liberation movement of 1943–1960 in which they took an active part. The second major factor was urbanisation that contributed to the evolution of women's traditional roles and tasks (Ibrahim 1991).

The role and place of elders are also changing in Somalia. Of course, the traditional social ties and norms of reciprocity remain quite strong and as such, Somali seniors are still expected to play an important role not only in the community but also in regards to the education of young children. However, as stated above, the traditional kinship system is being weakened as Somali youth is driven towards more autonomy and independence (Cohen and Menken 2006). The authors also underline another major factor that is drastically threatening seniors in terms of social support which results from the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa: many elders have now become the caregivers of their young grandchildren while having lost their own children as sources of personal and economic support (Cohen *et al.*).

Perception Of Aging And Old Age In The Western World

Western societies have an ambivalent—and often negative—conception of aging. Indeed, Thomas's 'scale of ages' (1983) shows that, in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, as one gets older, greater levels of social, psychological and spiritual benefits can be achieved. However, in the Western world, this correlation is reversed. The omnipresence of technological knowledge and the prevalence of the capitalist system can at least partially explain the rather ambiguous relationship to aging.

Several studies, such as Butler's (1969) and Palmore's (1999, 2001, 2004) have pointed to the negative beliefs and attitudes towards both the aging process and the seniors who embody such a process. Butler has conceptualized such beliefs and attitudes under the broad concept of *ageism*, which refers to the process of exclusion (social, economical, political and geographical) of seniors and the denial of their privileges. Stereotypes such as slowness, ugliness, senility, reliability, wisdom, kindness and incompetence constitute the essence of ageism (Kite *et al.* 2005; Palmore 1999). Interestingly, Levy and Banaji (2002) argue that, if ageism relies on the same logic as racism and sexism, it also differentiates itself from such discriminations according to the following three elements: 1) there is no human group showing hatred specifically towards the elderly; 2) mechanisms aiming at forbidding or at least denouncing ageism are virtually non-existent; and 3) ageism is transversal in the sense that, notwithstanding premature death, all individuals will eventually become elders. The dynamics between these three elements can explain the ambivalent relationship that the Western world has entertained with aging: although explicit ageism is rather rare, implicit manifestations of ageism are numerous. For example, Joannette *et al.* (2010) refer to the expression of "successful aging" which, according to them, implicitly refers to "staying young". In other words, when a person ages well, she or he is successful in fighting the (collectively perceived) ravages of time: decline and obsolescence. In such a cultural context, aging becomes taboo, a process to be avoided if one does not want to be marginalized, excluded and stigmatized. In sum, Western societies strongly value independence, autonomy and (economic) productivity and as such, it is plausible that these values legitimate and even reinforce stigmatization based on age, particularly in the specific context of the care for vulnerable elderly individuals (Bourbonnais and Ducharme 2010).

Research Questions

Our brief description of the perception of aging in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Western societies reveals the importance of culture in constructing the meaning of age as well as the place and role of elders. For example, in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, aging is not necessarily experienced negatively (at least from a social perspective) as is often the case in the Western world. However, it is important to note that these are general, dominant tendencies, which must not hide nuances: indeed, the social progression experienced by aging / old people in Africa is certainly accompanied by negative aspects and obviously, there is also a need to recognize nuances and subtleties of the aging experience in the context of Western societies. Nonetheless, such cultural markers are essential for the present study, whose main aim is to delineate the ways that the first-generation Somali community in Canada experience aging and old age. More specifically, the cultural markers related to the process of aging led to the following research questions:

- 1) What does aging mean for elderly Somalis in a general sense?
- 2) What does the experience of aging in both Canada and in Somalia mean for elderly Somalis?

- 2a) To what extent do these experiences differ?
- 3) To what extent is the meaning of aging gender-inflected among elderly Somalis?

Methodology

Procedures

In order to answer the above research questions, two focus groups were conducted in Ottawa between January and February 2010 with aging Somali men and women living in this same city. As the study aimed at a deeper understanding of the aging process among the Somali community, focus groups were deemed to be the most efficient tool in terms of data collection. Indeed, the use of focus groups was logically justified by the exploratory nature of the study as well as the cultural characteristics of participants (that is, Somalis deeply value a sense of community within a collectivist-oriented culture; Berg 2007).

Researchers initially contacted the coordinator of a community health center in Ottawa that welcomes many Somali seniors. These seniors were then invited to take part in one of two focus groups for a period of approximately three hours in a quiet room at the center. Focus groups were held separately for men and women in order to facilitate a discussion on aging issues from a cultural as well as gendered perspective. This procedure was also explicitly requested by participants themselves.

Focus group discussions were held in Somali language as some participants did not feel comfortable expressing their views and opinions in English. As such, one of the researchers (male native Somali speaker) moderated both focus groups in Somali language. A second researcher (Canadian-born female) attended as an observer, taking additional notes in terms of participants' non-verbal responses.¹ Finally, focus groups discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated from Somali to English.

Participants

A total of 17 Somali-born participants took part in the two focus groups. The first was comprised of 9 Somali female elders who frequently took part in the activities of the community center and who consequently seemed to know each other quite well. A total of 8 men participated in the second focus group; contrary to the women, Somali male participants were less familiar with each other as most of them did not attend the community center on a regular basis. Participants' socio-demographic characteristics are as follows: for *women*, the average age is 64.89 years (SD : 8.79), with the youngest women being 55 years old ($n = 2$) and the oldest, 83 ($n = 1$); a total of 6 women are widowed and 3 are married; as for living arrangements, the large majority (7 out of 9) is living either with family ($n = 7$) or friends ($n = 1$); only one Somali woman lives by herself. The average number

¹ It is important to note that both moderator and observer were much younger than participants; this could have influenced participants' responses and produced a social desirability bias (specifically in regards to discussions on younger generations of Somalis). However, as can be seen in the data analysis section, participants did not seem to attenuate their views on this topic of discussion. In the same way, the fact that the moderator was a male and the observer was a female may have influenced participants' responses. Precisely, researchers noticed that the men were less vocal and expressive than the women during discussions; it is plausible that the presence of a woman (observer) generated a certain sense of discomfort.

of children is 7.33 and the average number of years spent in Canada is 12.56. Finally, all of the women have identified Somali as the language they use on a daily basis.

Sociodemographic information for *men* is based on a sample of 7 participants as one of them did not provide this information: the average age is 61.63 years old (SD: 6.61); 6 of them are married and one is single; as for living arrangements, one participant lives by himself and the 7 others with a relative. Average number of children is 3.75 (the distribution is bimodal: 4 and 5). The average number of years spent in Canada is 17.75 and the language spoken daily is Somali for all of the participants.

Focus Group Questions

As mentioned above, focus groups were used as an exploratory tool to generate as much information as possible with regards to the research questions. Although they all focused on the theme of aging (including the cultural component of aging), the questions were broad enough to allow participants to express the broadest possible range of views on the theme. The questions used during the focus groups are as follows:

- What does aging mean to you, in a general sense?
- What are the challenges and the positive aspects of aging?
- How do you see aging in Canada?
- What are the challenges and the positive aspects of aging in Canada?
- How do you see aging in Somalia?
- What are the challenges and the positive aspects of aging in Somalia?

Data Analysis

Focus group data was analyzed by employing an Interpretative Content Analysis approach using the open coding procedure outlined by Berg (2007). Specifically, through a process of reading and rereading focus group notes, researchers identified indicators of the concepts under study (i.e., the meaning of aging in a general sense; the meaning of aging according to a specific cultural context as well as the meaning of aging according to gender). These indicators were then grouped in order to identify patterns of emerging themes (see Tables 2 and 3). In other words, through these qualitative analyses, researchers aimed at a better understanding of the deep, latent meaning of the data (Berg 2007).

Table 2 Emerging themes for female participants

Emerging Themes		
Meaning of...		
Aging in general	Aging in Somalia	Aging in Canada
Experience	Usefulness	High quality of healthcare system
Knowledge	Social contribution	Generational barriers (communication)
Wisdom	Family contribution	Language barriers
Physical decline		Marginalization (seniors homes)
Dependency		Harsh climate
Loss of beauty		
Social isolation (no communication)		

Table 3 Emerging themes for male participants

Emerging Themes		
Meaning of...		
Aging in general	Aging in Somalia	Aging in Canada
Experience	Strong social status	Complete loss of social status
Wisdom	Strong family status	Marginalization (seniors homes)
Physical decline	Leadership	
Loss of social status (leadership, earning an income)	Quality of Somali aging model	
	Emergence of generational barriers	

Discussion of Results

In this section, theme patterns that emerged from focus groups discussions with Somali elder female and male elders are summarized. Following is a discussion on the meaning of these themes, through a comparative analysis in terms of gender.

Somali Elder Women

Perception of Aging (In a General Sense and in Regards to Challenges and Positive Aspects of Aging)

In general, when asked what “aging” means to them, Somali elder women tend to hold a more positive than negative perception of the process. From the beginning of the group discussion, the large majority of women around the table spontaneously mentioned that aging is a “*blessing*” and that they are “*grateful to be alive*”. Moreover, for most of these women, aging is described as an enriching process from a psychological and spiritual perspective: it is a process through which a person gains more and more “*experience*”, more “*knowledge*”; consequently, elders also have more “*wisdom*” than their younger counterparts.

That being said, Somali elder women do not deny the challenges of aging. Indeed, if getting older is in some aspects a sign of progression for them, many underline its negative dimensions, notably in terms of physical and social barriers. The former is clearly expressed in the statement of one woman: “*when you’re young, you’re like a growing tree, but when you get older, you lose your strength.*” Moreover, declining physical strength (chronic disease being mentioned as the source of such a loss) is also synonymous with “*losing your independence*”. One woman articulates physical decline in terms of gender: “*as a woman, you lose your strength and you lose your beauty.*” This last result falls in line with Spitzers’ study (1998) on migration and menopause: Somali women state that feeling and being old starts around the age of 40 for women and 70 for men.

Social barriers are mostly described in terms of communication issues between generations: “*the times have changed, there’s a generational gap*”; “*the definitions of good and bad have changed...the child does not understand why they should not do certain things.*” In turn, Somali elderly women understand the communication issue between generations as a threat in terms of elders’ social status: “*for example, everyone listened to the elderly, no one interrupted them, but now the younger generation has their own opinion and does not have*

as much respect for the older generation.” It is important to note that this communication barrier was evoked in regards to aging *in general*, no matter the cultural context (although the problem seemed to be worse in the Canadian context, as we shall see below). Finally, from a non-verbal perspective, it is interesting to note that although elders easily identified negative aspects in regards to aging, they did so in a rather humorous fashion.

Perception of Aging in Somalia (Challenges and Positive Aspects)

According to a Somali saying, *“everybody is useful and needed, even the old woman standing at the corner of a building.”* It is precisely in these terms that the discussion on aging in Somalia started: as a matter of fact, the theme of elders’ usefulness became the main focus of the discussion (interestingly, although researchers tried to address other aspects of aging in Somalia, participants kept coming back to the theme of Somali elders’ usefulness and continuous contribution). When asked about the reasons why elders in Somalia were able to maintain this feeling of being helpful, most participants referred to the centrality of family in this specific cultural context: *“the word family is a very strong one, family is a system, a unit that is unbreakable”*; *“there is a strong sense of duty and there is mutual benefit...you help them in any way you can and people are interdependent.”* *“Helping them in any way they can”* precisely means, for these women, taking on an advising and protecting role vis-à-vis the younger members: *“To see my children and grand-children and to see their homes and to be near them, that is when I feel most useful.”*; *“I help my family and look after the house while they are at work; although we live apart, I still advise my family and I tell the children stories.”* It is interesting to note that, although participants often underlined miscommunication problems between elders and younger generations (regardless of the cultural context), this issue does not seem to impact how they view Somali elders’ contribution and usefulness to the family).

Perception of Aging in Canada (Challenges and Positive Aspects)

Aging in Canada was described in very positive terms in regards to public health and social support. Many women stressed that, thanks to the implementation of governmental programs and public policies on aging, most elders could do relatively well and be happy (regardless of their cultural background). The women’s comments reflected a deep sense of gratitude: *“When we left, we did not think we would survive. In Canada, I realized I would, I am happy to be here today”*; *“I have diabetes now. After 70 years of life, I cannot help myself now, Canada has helped me and I thank Canada and its people and the Somali community.”*

In regards to social dimensions though, aging in Canada was perceived in a more negative fashion. Specifically, for many female participants, Canadian society does not provide many interaction and communication opportunities for its elders: *“There is a lack of socialization, people are too busy to talk to them, even your children have no time for you”*; *“Elders have few people to listen to...and this can lead to depression.”* The discussion pertaining to a certain level of marginalization of elders shifted to the issue of miscommunication between generations (although participants expressed this particular issue in regards to Somali culture, they seem to perceive it as more of a problem in Canada). *“Respecting elders was a norm in Somalia, not so in Canada...this miscommunication may cause problems for the family unit.”* Most of all, Somali elder women perceived senior homes to be a major source of marginalization for elders in Canada and their view on this matter was quite radical: *“we would not like to be there, I would rather die.”* *“We have a culture in which the elderly is to be taken care of by the family*

and the relatives.” Seniors homes were seen as places where the elder was cut out of the real world.

As for their own experience of aging in Canada, Somali women expressed the difficulty integrating when not speaking either English or French. This situation translated into isolation, lack of power and dependence: “*I cannot understand what is going on around me as I only speak Somali*”; “*You constantly have to find a translator, you always need someone to be with you to see your doctor.*” The language barrier was also stated as the main reason why Somali elders did not interact with other Canadian born elders, a situation they found to be frustrating and limiting. Finally, the Canadian weather (precisely the winter season) was mentioned as a major barrier contributing to Somali elders’ feeling of social isolation in Canada: “*there is little sunshine, too much snow and not as much walking (as in Somalia)*”.

Somali Elder Men

Perception of Aging (In a General Sense and in Regards to the Challenges and Positive Aspects of Aging)

“*The real fact is that aging in my society and here are two different things. Aging shows me the right path of my future, which means, I will not be isolated or considered a drop-out from making societal contributions. Here, it (aging) is an inconvenience. Back home, they are taking care of themselves, they are part of a leading group...they are connected to society, there is no loophole as in here...there is a system of integrating the elderly.*” This quote is representative of the tone of the focus group discussion with men. Men were indeed much more critical than women as to the perception, not only of aging in general, but also of aging in the specific Canadian cultural context. In this regard, it is interesting to note that men did not have much to say about the meaning of aging in general but were very enthusiastic in comparing the experience of aging between Canada and Somalia.

As in the case of women, Somali men emphasized the physical decline that underlies the aging process but also mentioned the gain in terms of wisdom and experience. Health problems related to age were closely associated for men to “*not being able to earn your income*” and “*not being able to make decisions for people*”, or, in other words, to a loss of social status. This theme emerged as a major concern for Somali men; if aging did not seem to be a threat per se, losing one’s social status, “*not being consulted anymore*”, “*not having leadership*” was definitely one. Consequently, this explained why, from their perspective, Somali men did not fear aging in their home country.

Perception of Aging in Somalia (Challenges and Positive Aspects)

...*«Aging is a positive thing for Somali people. There is experience, leadership. People around you consult with you. As you age, you become more prominent, because of your experience. All the aspects—financial and otherwise—you put into your family, relatives and cousins. You do not fear age. In terms of the decline in Somalia, mental decline, it doesn’t start until 100 years of age. The environment is blessed and more comfortable for them, there is no stress for them, they stay fit.*” This quote from one participant accurately reflects how Somali men depicted aging in Somalia. All of them felt great pride in regards to the “*model*” of aging in Somalia, emphasizing the strong community and family links that allow the elder to be fully integrated into society: “*the elder is always and constantly in contact with other*

members of the family”; “they are listened to, consulted to resolve family disputes, whether for their own family or those of the community.”

Furthermore, most participants stressed how important it was to import their aging model into Canada (however, because of intergenerational family issues, this process has now become more problematic). Three participants also expressed the potential political impact of the Somali community on Canadian culture in regards to the perceptions of aging and the role of elders: indeed, they quoted an interview from the Health Minister of Ontario (Canada), where the Somali community was described as “exemplary” in terms of caring for its seniors. For male participants, this political statement reinforced their view that Somali traditions in regards to family and community solidarity was very beneficial for seniors. However, as will be described in the next section, most participants also expressed major concerns (due to generational issues) regarding the transferability and sustainability of the Somali model of aging in Canada.

Perception of Aging in Canada (Challenges and Positive Aspects)

While most female participants highlighted the positive aspects of aging in Canada, the opposite pattern seemed to emerge from the men’s focus group. The large majority was quite critical mainly in terms of the “social” aspects of aging in Canada. Specifically, the male participants described the loss of social status as the most difficult issue to deal with: *“It depends on where you are; if you are in Canada, you do not lose only physical and sometimes mental strengths but you also lose skills. The older you are, the more vulnerable to society...Here, I’m just another aging man in the area...as time passes on so do we... Here, you just sit in coffee shops, back home you become an elder. Back home, a 90 year old man can still function and care for himself.”* According to male participants, the fear of aging among Westerners is largely explained by this loss of social status, of elders not being attributed a role of “decision-makers” anymore.

The other polemical aspect of social aging in Canada concerned living arrangements, more precisely the concept of “senior homes” unanimously rejected by the male participants. All of them held a strong and negative perception of this style of housing. The words and metaphors used to describe senior homes were quite radical: *“an elder in a senior’s home is like a fish out of water: he or she is not with his family, his friends and his life is managed by bureaucrats and social workers...he (she) is not considered useful to society anymore”; “A human being must keep links with his family and friends. I feel that seniors homes are places where society throws its waste...I would rather die than go there”; “Retirement homes reflect the failure of the state, and of society in general, to take care of its citizens.”*

Male participants also discussed the issue of “culture” (in the sense of ethnicity) in relation to senior homes. In their view, it is very difficult for elder immigrants to fit into the lifestyle of these institutions: *“They are not adapted to account for cultural specificities. For example, healthcare workers in Canadian seniors homes should be culturally trained to gain some basic knowledge about different cultures and different traditions; for example, in the case of Somali culture, mosques should be built as well as private rooms to welcome the numerous family members, food is also very important, and so on.”* As in the case of female participants, the bottom line of the discussion on senior homes was simply that any place was better than these (*“Somalis consider that elders living in these institutions are already dead.”*). Such highly critical perspectives on senior homes combined with the perception of a generational fracture might partly explain why *all* male participants concluded the discussion by saying they wanted to go back to Somalia to live the last years of their life. *“I will*

not wait to become a dependent elder in Canada. I will return to Somalia where my children will not hesitate to take a plane and visit me when I need them to do so.”

Conclusion

The goal of the present exploratory study was to better understand how first generation Somalis living in Canada experience aging. This study was done from a threefold perspective: 1) the meaning of aging in a general sense 2) the meaning of aging according to a specific cultural context (i.e. Canada and Somalia) and 3) the meaning of aging according to gender. Results of the content analysis suggest that, in regards to the first perspective (the meaning of aging in a general sense), Somalis seem to have quite a positive view of the idea of aging. Indeed, although they recognize that the process brings its load of challenges (particularly physical decline), most of them emphasized the positive aspects of becoming old through enhanced experience, wisdom and knowledge. Aging, in the participants' view, is a blessing, something to be proud of. Interestingly, the participants suggest that first generation Somalis could be “protected”, to a certain extent, from the negative social discourse on aging prevailing in the Western world. A large number of previous studies have indeed shown that age-based stereotypes and discrimination have found their way into Canadian culture, notably in the context of workplace and healthcare (Lagacé *et al.* 2011; Lagacé *et al.* 2008; Kane and Kane 2005; Palmore 2004). Moreover, these studies have shown that not only do ageist stereotypes have a demeaning impact on Canadian born elders' identity, they are also very often internalized by the elders themselves. For example, Tougas *et al.* (2004) have shown that senior workers internalize negative stereotypes based on age, such as being less competent, more resistant to change and less productive than younger workers. Such a pattern did not emerge from the participants' interviews on which the present study relies. Indeed, although Somalis feared a loss of social status, they still described the process of aging and the status of the old in quite positive terms. Could it be that their “model” of aging, imported from their birth country, acts as a protective shield against ageism? Further studies involving comparison groups could allow a better understanding of the role of culture in regards to ageism.

Thus, it is not surprising that participants generally had a more positive perception of aging in Somalia than in Canada. Although the majority of participants stated the well-structured aspect of formal support programs for elders in Canada (except in the case of living arrangements), they also stressed the difficult situation (that is, the social isolation) faced by Canada-born elders. Interestingly, their fear of such social isolation is related to their own experience as they acknowledge the intergenerational gap between their views of aging and their Canada-born-and-raised children. For these men and women, this could be enough of a reason to go back and spend their remaining years in Somalia. Results of previous studies did suggest a dysfunction in intergenerational ties between immigrant seniors and their Canadian born children and grandchildren as both may have different norms and values precisely in regards to informal support (Basavarajappa 1998; Olazabal 2011). Consequently, this potential tension between different generations may partly explain the overly positive vision of aging *in Somalia* stemming from the large majority of participants in this study. Let us recall that all participants in this study, with the exception of one male participant, had children (average of 7.33) and that these were spread over Canada and Somalia; the large majority of participants expected children to care for them the day they return to their home country (this way, they could avoid the most threatening

alternative of living arrangements: a senior facility). Would this be necessarily the case or is it plausible that there is also some kind of a generational fracture in Somalia? Furthermore, participants' statements that seniors can count on their children in Somalia may imply that individuals with no lineage may be left in quite a threatening situation as they cannot rely on any alternative formal support system. In other words, future studies should involve not only a larger sample of Somali participants but also take into account different family structures.

Finally, as far as the gender perspective is concerned, both men and women strongly expressed negative feelings towards "senior homes", describing the latter as a major source of social exclusion for all elders. In this regard, male and female participants were all hoping for the construction of senior facilities that would be more "culturally sensitive", for example, homes that would be built around specific cultural and religious values. Such perceptions are in line with Salari's study (2002) that focused on Arab Americans, Middle Eastern Immigrants, and Muslims in the United States. In this study, participants also expressed the need to build senior homes dedicated to specific cultural and religious communities. Further studies are needed to address this important question of senior facilities in regards to culture and religion, in a spirit of cohabitation of communities.

Male and female participants did however have different views of other negative aspects of the aging experience in Canada. Men heavily emphasized the loss of social status that comes with age (in their view, such a loss is particularly present within the context of a Western culture). In contrast, women underlined that aging meant losing one's beauty. Not surprisingly, such results reflect the differential component of aging when it comes to gender and which stands true, according to Stuckelberger and Höpflinger (1996), regardless of cultural context.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, as well as the small convenience sample on which it is based, findings can obviously not be generalized to the entire Somali Canadian community. Precisely, our findings would most likely have been different had we included participants with no children as well participants of different age groups. For example, Youngs' (1996) study suggests that young Somali women tend to build stronger and multiple ties with Canadians as opposed to their elder peers who stay within the boundaries of the community. That being said, this study has contributed to the advancement of knowledge in that it has allowed us to not only access a first generation group of Somali elders in Ottawa but most importantly, to listen to their perspectives. Too often, as noted by Olazabal (2011), immigrant seniors' voice is lacking in research. Community leaders, family and experts report on immigrant seniors' needs and experiences but they (the immigrant seniors) are often not directly involved in the process. Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, relatively little research has been done on the Somali community in Canada, and even less on Somali seniors. It is important to understand how these individuals experience aging: indeed, they are the first group of Somali immigrants to share their views and perceptions of age and aging with their (often) Canada-born-and raised children. How will these children view and experience aging in such a hybrid context is an interesting question to explore in future studies.

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